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9
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

CAPTAIN WILLIAM H. SWIFT,

OF THE

TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS,

UNITED STATES ARMY,

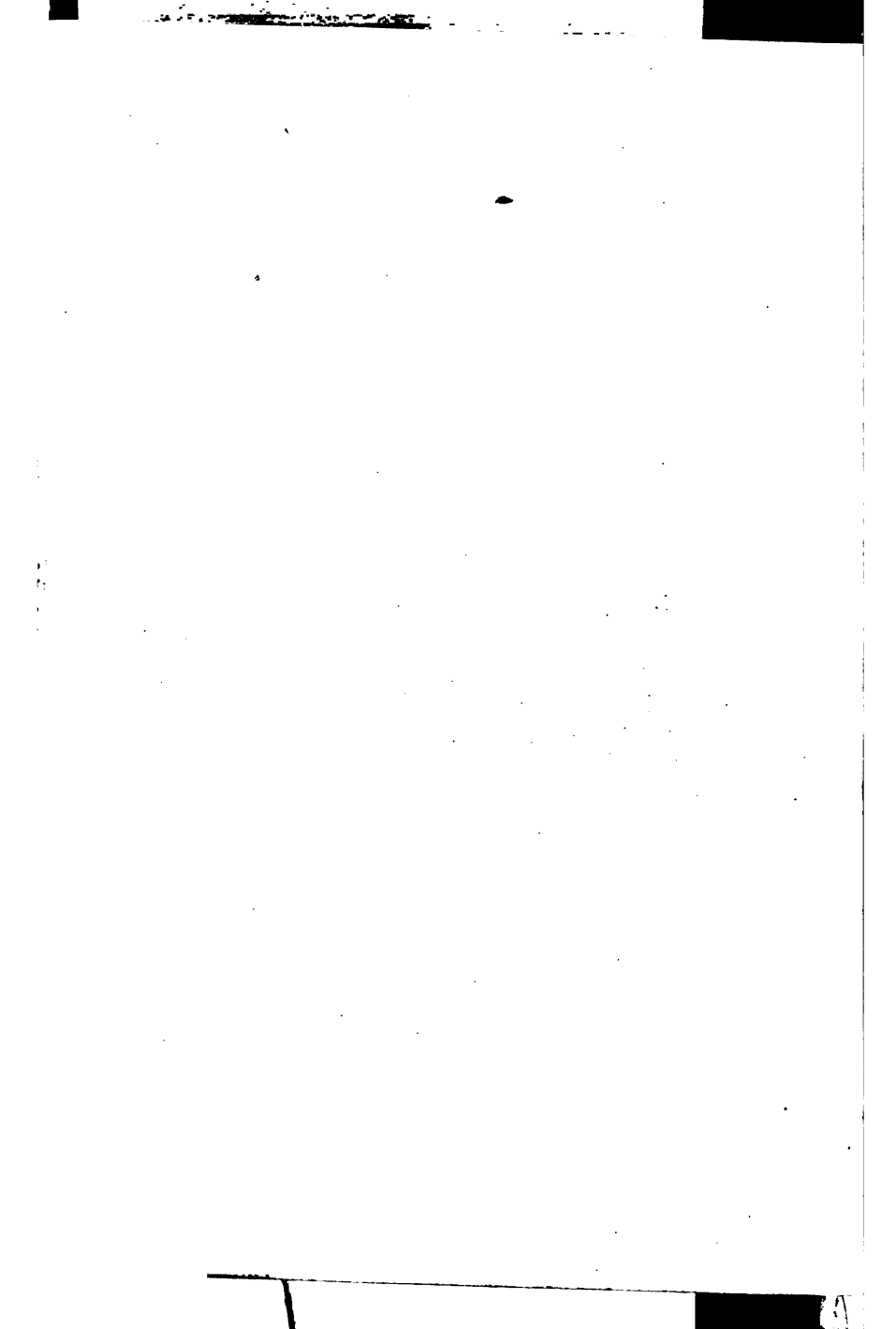
1832-1849.

BY
George W. Cullum
GEORGE W. CULLUM,

BREVET MAJOR-GENERAL, U. S. ARMY.

NEW YORK:

A. G. SHERWOOD & CO., PRINTERS, 76 EAST NINTH ST.,
1880.



With kind remembrances from
H. H. S.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

BY

BYT. MAJOR-GENERAL GEO. W. CULLUM, U. S. ARMY,

OF

CAPTAIN WILLIAM H. SWIFT,

Born, November 6, 1800, at Taunton, Massachusetts.

Died, April 7, 1879, at New York City.

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1984, 1985, 1986
1987, 1988, 1989
1990, 1991, 1992

CAPTAIN WILLIAM HENRY SWIFT was born, November 6, 1800, at Taunton, Mass. On his father's side he was of Puritan descent, on his mother's Huguenot, and many of his ancestors were persons of note in New England. His father—Doctor Foster Swift—was a Surgeon in the United States Army ; his mother was Deborah Delano, of Nantucket, Mass. ; and his elder brother was General Joseph Gardner Swift, the first graduate of the U. S. Military Academy.

When very young, Swift was sent to a school of excellent repute, at Hanover, N. H., near the residence of his uncle, Captain Delano ; and, April 15, 1813, when but thirteen years old, was appointed a Cadet of the U. S. Military Academy, which he entered August 13, 1813, there becoming more distinguished for his love of fun than for devotion to study. Upon the recommendation of Major Thayer, then Superintendent of the Military Academy, he was ordered by the Secretary of War, in December 1818, to accompany Major Long's Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, a service which tamed down his juvenile playfulness and developed the germ from which

sprung the rich flower and fruitage of his after useful manhood. When not assisting the officers of the expedition, he, having a great fondness for adventure, would join in the chase for buffalo, deer and other game, which often took him so far away from his friends that, on one of his hunting excursions, he was captured by a band of Pawnee Indians, whose chief wished to adopt him ; but Swift, though declining the honor of becoming a savage, was allowed to return to the expedition after a detention of some months during which he was kindly treated and became familiar with the Indian habits of life.

When the expedition returned in February, 1821, Swift's class had been graduated, some twenty months before, from the Military Academy ; hence, not having been examined by the Academic Board, he was attached to the end of the class-roll and given, as Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Artillery, the same date of promotion, July 1, 1819, as to his classmates already commissioned in the Army.

Swift, after the completion of the Map of Major Long's expedition in June 1821, was engaged till 1826, under Colonel Abert of the Topographical Engineers, on surveys for military defenses, of rivers and harbors on the Atlantic coast, and of several routes for the contemplated Chesapeake and Ohio

Canal. Swift, from 1826 to 1828, had charge of the various parties engaged in the surveys of the Florida Isthmus Canal, and of the Gulf Harbors from Sawanee river to Pensacola.

About this time, upon the recommendation of Colonel Abert, the War Department had yielded to the demands of the country, in which there were then few educated Civil Engineers, to detail officers from the army to carry out numerous projected internal improvements, particularly of railways, which in half a century, from the feeble beginning of twenty-three miles in 1830, have multiplied so rapidly as to form a net-work of more than 100,000 miles over the whole land. Among the earliest pioneers in these enterprises were Major Long, Captain McNeill, Lieutenant Whistler and Lieutenant Swift, the latter, in 1828-29, being engaged upon the surveys of the Ithaca and Oswego, and the Ithaca and Catskill railroads.

Swift was engaged in the U. S. Post-office-Department at Washington City, from 1830 to 1832, in compiling and executing, almost entirely with his own hand, an elaborate Post-route Map of the United States with books of distances, which were so complete that they have been the basis of all since used in the Department. During these two years, Swift

also assisted Captain McNeill and Lieutenant Whistler in the surveys of the Boston and Providence, Taunton and New Bedford, Norwich and Worcester, and Stonington and Providence Railroads.

Swift, in the meantime, August 5, 1824, had been promoted to be a First Lieutenant in the First Artillery, and, August 1, 1832, was attached to the General Staff of the Army with the appointment of Brevet Captain of Topographical Engineers, becoming, subsequently, a full Captain when the Topographical Engineers, July 7, 1838, was organized into a Corps.

Captain Swift's attainments were considered so high that, at the request of Professor Hassler, Superintendent of the United States Coast Survey, he was detailed, in 1833, as one of the Principal Assistants on that great geodetic work, being placed in charge of the secondary triangulation of Fisher's Island Sound, and of the entire Eastern end of Long Island Sound from the mouth of Connecticut River to Montauk Point. At the same time he assisted in the measurement of a Base-Line on Fire Island ; and during his detail on the survey, from 1833 to 1843, was its disbursing officer. Besides these multiplied duties he, at various times, had charge of fifteen river and harbor improvements, breakwaters, etc.,

along the Atlantic coast from Portland, Me., to Westport, Conn., and, from 1836 to 1840, was Resident and Superintending Engineer of the Massachusetts Western Railroad, from Worcester, Mass., to the New York state-line. In 1840-41, Swift was in Europe procuring some valuable instruments for the prosecution of the Coast Survey, being also engaged in an examination of the great hydraulic works of Holland. After his return he, in 1843, was a member of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy, in the success of which institution he took the deepest interest to the day of his death.

From 1843, when Swift was relieved from duty on the Coast Survey, till July 31, 1849, when he resigned from the army, he was the Principal Assistant to Colonel Abert, the Chief of the Topographical Bureau, at Washington city, though, during these six years, he was often detailed upon other important duties.

The principal of these detached services was as a Commissioner upon the Illinois and Michigan Canal, designed to unite the waters which flow into the Gulf of St. Lawrence with those which empty into the Gulf of Mexico. This canal, ninety-six miles long, from Lake Michigan (near Chicago) to La Salle (head of

navigation of the Illinois river) is sixty feet wide at the water line, thirty-four at bottom, and six feet deep; with seventeen locks to overcome the difference of level of one hundred and forty-five feet. Its vast importance was recognized by the citizens of Illinois soon after its formation as a State from the Northwest Territory. The right of way for this canal through the United States domain was granted by Congress, which also, at different times, donated 318,895 acres of public lands in aid of the enterprise. Several plans for a canal had been proposed by various commissioners, but, not till 1836, were any efficient measures adopted for the prosecution of this great work. Then, new commissioners and engineers commenced cutting the canal (estimated to cost \$8,654,000), and prosecuted the work until 1841, when, for want of funds, labors were suspended. In 1843, the Governor of Illinois was empowered to negotiate, for its completion, a loan of \$1,600,000 to be redeemed by the sale of lands and by tolls from the canal. At this time Captain Swift was appointed an Assistant Commissioner, with Governor John Davis of Massachusetts, to examine the project of this canal in order to determine the practicability of its completion within the amount of the proposed loan. The Secretary of War having author-

ized Swift's acceptance of the responsible trust for which he had been selected, the commissioners, within two years, reported favorably upon the completion of the canal for the amount of the loan, which was taken by the Barings of London and other bankers. The success of the negotiations to secure the loan was greatly due to the business tact, engineering experience, and upright character of Swift, who, in 1845, became President of the Board of Trustees which was vested with full authority to complete the canal, to sell the lands and lots, and, after payment of all loans and bonds, to turn over any surplus to the State of Illinois. From June 26, 1845, to August 16, 1871, during which period of twenty-six years Swift had continued in the Presidency of the Board of Trustees, it had honorably discharged every duty, completed the canal, faithfully accounted for \$10,913,765 which had passed through its hands, and, after liquidating every claim, paid over the balance in hand of \$97,007 to the State of Illinois. This great work, so wisely, judiciously and economically administered without the loss of a dollar, will ever stand an enduring monument of Swift's sterling integrity, engineering skill and fertility of resource amid every difficulty ; for his was the organizing brain and directing hand of the Board from its inception, and

he the steady pursuer of enlightened plans and the tower of strength which persistently resisted the blows of popular clamor and assaults of charlatanism. So highly gratified were the English bankers with Captain Swift's able administration of this trust, that they not only communicated to him their "high appreciation of the services he had rendered and their personal regards," but asked his acceptance of an extra year's salary of \$2,500. After Swift's death, all of his large and very valuable collection of reports, correspondence, accounts, maps, etc., pertaining to the canal, were given to the Chicago Historical Society.

Captain Swift, while in Europe, had been strongly impressed with Alexander Mitchell's invention for forcing iron piles, by means of mooring-screws, into muddy or sandy shoals. Seizing its advantages with the intuition of an able engineer, he made the first application, in this country, of the principle in the erection of an Iron Beacon, which is yet standing at the entrance of Black Rock Harbor, Conn. Satisfied with the success of this experiment, Swift, in 1847, decided upon making a bolder test in the construction of a Lighthouse on the Outer Minot Ledge, off the southern chop of Boston Bay, near Cohasset, Mass. These Cohasset Rocks had ever been the

terror of mariners, and were the cause of a greater number of wrecks than any other reef on the Atlantic coast. Swift, believing this position too exposed for any masonry structure which could be built for the limited appropriation made by Congress, projected a skeleton Iron Tower for this Minot Rock, the surface of which was only thirty feet in diameter at extreme low-water. This tower was formed of eight wrought-iron piles, ten inches in diameter at bottom and eight at top, placed at the angles of an octagon of twenty-five feet in diameter, with an eight inch pile in the centre, all of which were sunk five feet into the solid rock, and rose sixty feet above low-water, being at top brought within the periphery of a circle of fourteen feet in diameter. All the piles were firmly connected together, by horizontal and diagonal iron braces, the whole forming, as it were, an immense *lewis*. Upon this skeleton tower rested the keeper's dwelling and the lantern of the light-house.

In this very exposed situation the difficulties of construction were so great that two entire seasons were consumed in drilling the pile-holes in the rock. The erection of the tower being a much less troublesome operation, the whole work was completed by November, 1848. This boldly designed and well

executed structure proved inadequate to meet all the casualties to which it was subsequently subjected. It was carried away, April 16, 1851, after a terrific gale of some days, increasing to a perfect hurricane. In the afternoon of that day it was last seen from Cohasset ; about midnight the fog-bell was heard between the fearful pauses of the tempest, no light being visible ; and at dawn of the next morning the broken fragments, scattered along the shore, proclaimed the fate of the ill-starred structure and of the two unfortunate light-keepers, nothing remaining on the rock except the stumps of the iron piles which had been bent and snapped off a few feet above the surface by this tremendous tempest untimely occurring when the tides were at their very highest. For this disaster no censure can be justly attached to the constructing engineer, for be it remembered that, at this early date, the newly-invented method of skeleton iron construction for lighthouses was in its infancy.

The causes of the destruction of this lighthouse are best given in Captain Swift's own official report. He says: "Upon the horizontal braces, nearly forty feet above the rock, the keeper had improperly built a sort of deck or platform, upon which was placed a quantity of heavy articles, such as fuel,

water-barrels, etc., all of which should have been in the store-room, the place designed for their reception. The deck, in addition to the weight placed upon it, was fastened together and secured to the piles and braces, thus offering a large surface to the sea to strike against. In addition to this, the keeper had attached a five and a half inch hawser or guy to the lantern-deck, sixty-three feet above the rock, and anchored the other end of this hawser to a granite block weighing, according to his own account, seven tons, placed upon the bottom at a distance of some fifty fathoms from the base of the light. The object of this was to provide means for running a box or landing-chair up and down ; but it was very clear that so much surface exposed to the moving sea had the same effect upon the lighthouse as would have been produced by a number of men pulling at a rope attached to the highest point of the structure with the *design* of pulling it down. * * * * At four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, the 16th, or ten hours before the light fell, the platform above mentioned came ashore at Cohasset. As this was forty-three feet above the line of low-water, and twenty-eight feet above high-water, spring tides, the sea had at that time reached within seven feet of the base of the store-room of the lighthouse. Without

undertaking to speculate upon the probable shock that the structure must have received from the effect of the sea upon a platform fastened to the piles forty feet above the rock, it is enough to know that the sea had reached within seven feet of the body or solid part of the structure. Still increasing, it required but a slight increase in the height of the wave, after having reached the deck, to bring it in contact with the main body of the structure. When this took place it is plain to perceive that such a sea, acting upon the surface of the building at the end of a lever fifty or sixty feet long, must be well nigh irresistible, and I doubt not the lighthouse was thus destroyed."

We would add that the limited means, less than \$40,000 at the disposal of the engineer, proved inadequate to build a lighthouse suitable to this very exposed position, which needed to have a base of at least forty, and a height of one hundred feet whereon to place the keeper's dwelling, store-rooms, and lantern, to ensure safety from the reach of the highest storm-waves. The present granite lighthouse on this same Outer Minot, designed by General Totten and built by General B. S. Alexander of the Corps of Engineers, is one hundred feet to the lantern, the entire height being one hundred and twelve

feet. Even with this great height, after a heavy storm the waves and spray not infrequently "bury" the Minot tower and lantern completely out of sight from the shore (one and a half miles distant), though a powerful telescope be used.

Swift had now become so connected with the civil works of the country that he deemed it due to himself, as well as to his brother officers, to tender the resignation of his commission in the army, which, as before stated, was accepted July 31, 1849. Soon after, he was appointed President of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, which position he held till February 11, 1851, when his resignation was accepted "with deep and sincere regret." The multifarious concerns of the company had been under Swift's almost exclusive control, and were so satisfactorily managed that the Directors, in one of their resolutions accepting his resignation, say of Swift that: "all the high expectations which were entertained have been amply fulfilled, and the business of the Company has been conducted under his auspices with that wisdom and energy which are well displayed by the improved and improving condition of the Company."

Upon resigning from the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, Swift accepted the

Presidency of the Massachusetts Western Railroad (now Boston and Albany), with which, as engineer, he had been connected in former years. It is needless to add that in the three years, during which he held this responsible position, he acquitted himself of his great trust to the entire satisfaction of the Company, of which, after resigning the Presidency of the road, he continued its most active working Director. He had won such golden opinions among the people of Massachusetts that Harvard University, in 1853, conferred upon him the degree of A.M. ; and, in 1854, the Governor of the State appointed him a Commissioner to divide the State lands from those of the City of Boston.

Swift, in 1855, made an able report to the Canada Board of Public Works on the proposed canal between the St. Lawrence River and Lake Champlain, in favor of the Caughnawaga route ; and, during the same year, he visited England to consult with the proprietors of the Grand Trunk Railroad upon its value and prospects.

Swift, in 1846, became Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad and held this position till 1877. In the twenty-one years of his Chairmanship, \$4,000,000 had been received and accounted for by the Trustees ;

and the bondholders, under the mortgage of April 1, 1856, had been paid in full, principal and interest.

Swift was also a prominent Director in the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad from 1876 till he died. At the first meeting of the Board of Directors of the Company, after Swift's death, a unanimous resolution was passed expressive of "its sense of his high character and attainments as well as its appreciation of his labors in behalf of, and his loyalty to, the best interests of the Company."

Swift, in 1874, on behalf of this Company, had visited England and made a favorable financial arrangement with the Messrs. Baring & Co., who held a large interest in the road and its properties. Swift, from his first acquaintance with these London bankers, possessed their entire confidence, and to the day of his death was their confidential adviser in all their American transactions relating to railroads.

Declining physical strength warned Swift that he had passed the Psalmist's measure of life; yet, with a mind serene and bright, he continued his daily employments, read much of history and general literature, and delighted in the social intercourse of familiar friends. At last, when he had attained the green old age of nearly fourscore years, he passed from earth to heaven, April 7, 1879, his long journey, to

the very end, being attended by the beautiful accompaniments of "honor, love and troops of friends."

It is difficult in fitting phrase to do justice to the beloved and revered memory of such a nobleman of nature as Captain Swift, and to portray his gentle, cheerful and buoyant spirit ; his refined courtesy and vivacity of manner ; his sweet serenity of temper, abounding humor and genial conversation ; his conscientious candor and ingenuous frankness ; his lofty honor, without soil or blemish ; his devotion to duty as to a shrine of worship ; his fulfilment of pledges and fidelity to every trust ; his judgment in meeting and energy in overcoming obstacles ; his patient and tireless industry in all pursuits ; his modesty in measuring his achievements ; his probity and justice under every temptation ; his cheerful confidence and tranquil courage amid difficulties ; his love of home and affection for kindred and friends ; and, in fine, render due honor to all the varied virtues harmoniously fused together to form this upright officer, who

" bore, without abuse
The grand old name of gentleman."

In his official relations, ⁺one who had known Swift intimately for forty years, says in a letter : " He carried into business the same qualities that distin-

J. G. Ward

guished him elsewhere—the instinct of a thorough gentleman, and the training of a soldier: sound sense, and a delicacy of feeling that made it impossible for him to look on the right or left of the path of duty and honor. I never thought of him as a trader, but always as a trustee; and trustworthiness, in every act, thought or opinion, is the word above all others to characterize him. He was naturally conservative and added to these qualities a sense of order, both natural and acquired, which maintained every piece of work at all times in as great completeness as it could be. He was tenacious of his opinions, and they became a part of himself; and if he once set a black mark against a man, it was not easy to induce him to erase it, but his instincts were so true that he rarely had occasion to change his judgments of men.”

But Swift's daily contact with the outside crafty world never blunted his sensibilities nor dwarfed his intellect. Nature had imbued him with a simplicity of heart, a refined unconsciousness of excellence which had not the slightest taint of vanity or tarnish of self-complacency. This gentle, childlike simplicity was one of the great charms of his character, and gave a placid repose to his entire life. He had a sensibility feelingly responsive to every fine impulse; a

kindness, like golden threads running through the tissue of his whole being ; and a modesty, which was reflected in all his acts, which colored all his surroundings, and heightened all his virtues. His modesty forbade his ever dwelling upon his own great achievements or daily acts of benevolence, though from others he keenly appreciated generous commendations that were deserved. His heart was always open, his counsel ever ready, and his sympathy warmly alive to all modest merit struggling with adversity. This tender compassion for the unfortunate was so strong that even his stern moral sense would soften to the evil-doer led astray by alluring temptation, his considerate reply to relentless Pharisees being always : "put yourself in the poor fellow's place, that is the only way to judge a man." Though his melting charity of thought commiserated wrong, he never swerved a tittle from an open expression and earnest advocacy of right. His candor courted the light ; rectitude was the pole-star of his intellectual as of his moral nature ; and honor his sacred tie to humanity, "the noble mind's distinguishing perfection." His sense of justice was so strong and so unselfish that, even in matters involving his own interest, no one hesitated to abide by his decisions, for they were strictly impartial and based

on truth. In his crystal conscience truth entered as a beam of pure white light, without the tinge of one deviated ray of duplicity, directing him in the path of duty. Thus duty was not the mere routine of business, but a great moral obligation, the main-spring of all his transactions. Whatever he did was well done and done systematically, for to him order was "heaven's first law" in conducting the smallest detail as the greatest undertaking ; and untiring industry was the prodigious lever of his success. Work, to attain a worthy and useful purpose, sweetened his every moment with profit, seasoned all hours with joy, and idle days were canker-worms of his happiness. In all his acts practical common sense was conspicuous, and his views were plainly presented without the slightest garniture of show, or veiled with any gossamer of conventional phraseology. Ever ready at the opportune moment, he struck while the iron was hot, never, however, disdaining through perseverance to make the iron hot by striking. He prudently looked well to the past and forward to the future, but his habitual caution, which weighed in nice balance truth against error, was not the "leaden servitor of dull delay." He rarely lost his admirable equipoise amid all the disturbing elements of a jarring world ; and his sound

judgment, though so promptly rendered as to appear an intuition, was always based on ascertained facts, sagacious arguments, and mature reflection. His capacity for affairs was incontestable, and such confidence was reposed in his skilful management and well-tried fidelity that, till a few years before he died, he held, besides his public, no less than twenty-eight private trusts ; was the safe custodian of many secrets of sorrow, trial and misfortune ; and gave as careful and minute supervision to the interests of his family, relatives, and intimates, as to his own. Yet, while accomplishing so much, he never seemed busy. His study, in which most of his work was done, was at all hours open to his friends, and, no matter how troublesome or complicated his work in hand might be, he was always ready to turn from it to offer his hearty, genial welcome to a visitor or to patiently listen to any domestic or business affair brought to him for advice or consideration. But, when his day's work was done, his task was over, and he enjoyed his quiet evenings, his friends and his books, when their turn came, without a trace of pre-occupation. Books he read for recreation as well as for knowledge ; but the chief joys of his life were his family and friends, particularly his army associates for whom his heart ever yearned. He was especially

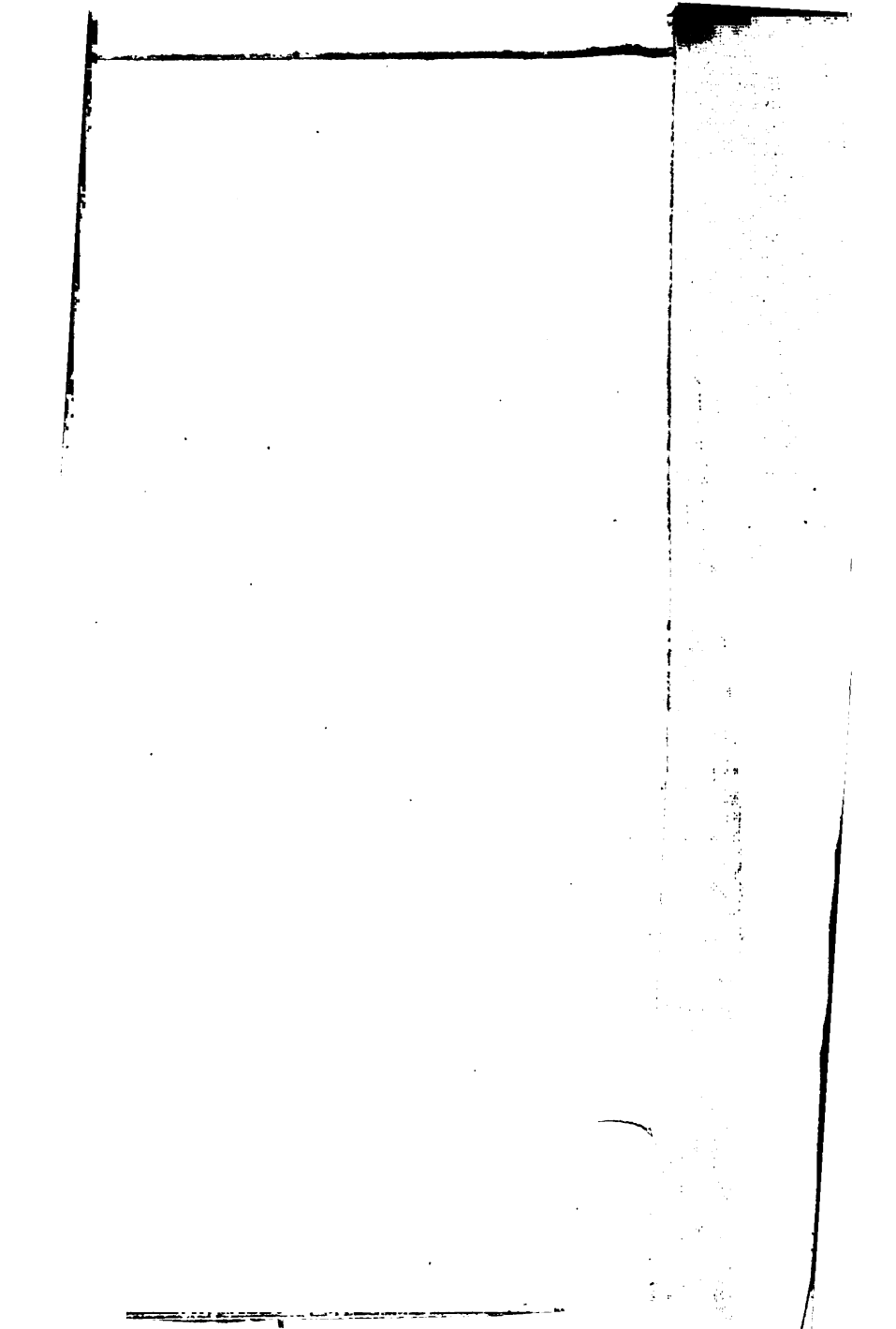
fond of the Military Academy and its traditions, and toward its graduates he grew more and more kindly and sympathetic with every waning year of life. This affection was warmly reciprocated, for he had a magnetic influence over all his intimates, and even the casual acquaintance was won by his sincerity, fidelity, manly virtues, and capacity of brotherhood. He inspired love and confidence also in those, whatever their stations, transiently employed on the various works under his supervision, for their interests became his ; their claims upon his sympathy or consideration met with a prompt response ; and no worthy subordinate, however necessary to him, failed of his influence to be advanced to a more lucrative position. It is therefore not strange that Swift was beloved and honored by the whole community with which he associated. For every one he had a gentle and kind word, a hearty, cordial greeting, and put all at ease by that urbanity of manner, or high breeding which comes from the heart and is refined into an inexpressible charm by the constant mingling with polished society. With the world, both at home and abroad, he had had much intercourse which gave him an affable, yet dignified demeanor, not as a garment put on for court occasion, but which was the habitual, graceful drapery of life. They who knew him

slightly perhaps thought him reserved, but no intimate could approach him without catching the merry twinkle of his speaking eyes. His mirth and cheerfulness were the fountain-springs, sparkling and bright, of his social life which diffused refreshing dews of gladness upon all others, and to himself gave that happy temperament, rarely clouded by care, which like the dial, marked only the hours that shine.

Swift was indeed the light and strength of his immediate circle, and at his own fireside was most truly appreciated, for he was the most devoted of husbands and the tenderest of parents; to the friends he had, and their adoption tried, his heart was faithful to the last hour of life; he was the incorruptible citizen whom neither power nor pay could swerve; the firm patriot whose whole country was holy ground; the efficient officer ever at his post of duty; the able agent punctiliously faithful in the administration of every trust; the soul of honor with the courage to execute the commands of conscience; and in his manly bosom lofty sentiments were embellished by the softer refinements of a most noble nature, which

"like gold, the more 'tis tried
The more shall its intrinsic worth proclaim."





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Biographical sketch of Captain Will
Cabot Science 004525724



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